Duration: 5 Weeks (January 9–February 10, 2017)

Learning Outcomes:
By the end of the fifth week, students will:
  • Understand the real purpose of the premise line,
  • Know how to identify a story from a situation,
  • Understand how premise relates to story structure,
  • Know how to design and execute a two-, three-, or twenty-page synopsis,
  • And they will have a working premise line and log line for one of their own stories.

But, most importantly, going forward, each student will have a repeatable and reliable premise/story development methodology they can use on any new story idea.

Required materials:

Anatomy of a Premise Line: How to Master Premise and Story Development for Writing Success, by Jeff Lyons (Focal Press—order from Amazon: http://amzn.to/1Es0iAm—Note: book may not be available for purchase at start of class, but will be available for pre-order. Books should be available after mid-July.)

Reading assignments and discussion questions are required for a letter grade, or pass-fail status. These resources are invaluable tools for any writer, and I encourage all students to thoroughly read them.

My Presence Online:

I am almost always available online, either in class or via my email. Each week begins on a Monday and ends on a Friday. Written assignments are due by Thursday night midnight Pacific Time. You can use the weekends for commenting on discussion questions if you like. Please note, that once a week is completed, I will not go back to the previous week, in order to keep the class progressing. Of course, life sometimes gets in the way, so if you need extra time for a good reason, please let me know, and we can make arrangements.
Weekly Reading and Discussion Questions:

Each week, I will have you read something from the selected readings and will post discussion questions on that reading. Specific reading sections for Anatomy of a Premise Line will be given at the beginning of each week. It will be mandatory that students participate in these discussions by sharing ideas or asking additional questions. These will not be live, one-on-one, but rather in the discussion areas online.

Weekly Written Assignments:

Written assignments are the craft of the class, and they are mandatory. Templates and forms for written assignments will be provided at the beginning of the course and each week.

Weekly One-on-One Sessions:

Twice weekly we will hold “hot seat sessions.” These will be Chat/Zoom sessions where I will work one-on-one with students and work through questions, blockages, and work the 7-step process directly with individuals. There are two sessions per week (Monday & Friday). Sessions will be scheduled when most people are able to attend. If you can’t make one, then please make the other. Sessions will be 45–60 minutes. In this context, group sessions, rather than individual sessions, are preferable, as a lot of learning happens when you “watch” other people go through the process real-time. The first four weeks will focus on premise line development and testing story ideas. The four weeks will also include discussion of synopsis development and any related issues that arise.

Critiquing:

Because students are learning brand new techniques, they won’t have the initial skills to critique other students, so instead we will be discussing every student’s assignments, guided by me, to ensure everyone understands each technique as it is implemented. This will be done as part of the one-on-one video sessions and also during the discussion sessions online in the chat/discussion areas. The other reason for no critiquing or workshopping is that your workload will be heavy in the last four weeks of class and I don’t want to burden you with the time it will require to analyze other people’s work (especially when you haven’t figured out your own yet.)
Written Assignment Lengths:

Premise development written assignments will be directed by template forms the will be provided. The nature of the process and the assignments is such that brevity is the point; less is more. Keep each premise/log line assignment to no more than 500 words per worksheet. The synopsis written assignments should be no more than 1250 words (@ 5 pages). Two final written deliverables are required by each student at the end of the course: a finalized “Premise Line Worksheet,” a finalized “Log Line Worksheet.” A third deliverable is optional, a three-to-five page synopsis, which will be introduced the last couple weeks of class. The synopsis is not the focus for the class, but is included to give students an idea of next steps after the class is completed.

Grades:

For those of you who are taking this course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows. Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting (Friday of the last week of class) by contacting your school’s Continuing Studies department.

- Writing exercises (weeks 1-8) 50%
- One-on-one sessions (weeks 1-8) 35%
- Posted Discussions/Questions (weeks 1-8) 15%
Week One:

What is a story premise and why is it important? This week we look at the nuts and bolts of what premise development means and why it is an essential first step in creating any story. Topics: Step 1 of the 7-step process, premise defined, what is a story-character-plot, and how to tell a story from a situation.

*Written Assignment (two parts):*

Part 1: BEFORE you read any of the required materials, write out your story premise as best you can and upload to the system for my review. This assignment will be used as your benchmark for later comparison to the final premise line in week three. Ideally, this should be uploaded by midnight PST, Monday Jan 9 — again, please do this assignment before reading any of the resources I provided for the first week!

Part 2: Using the “Story vs. Situation Worksheet” describe why you think you have a story or a situation. Use the five criteria used in the reading and lecture notes as the basis for your explanation.

*Chat/ZOOM Session:*

Friday Jan 13, 6pm PST, 7pm MST, 8pm CST, 9pm EST. Length 45–60 mins.
Week Two:

This week we look at steps 2 and 3 of the 7-step process: “Anatomy of a Premise Line” template and the Invisible Structure. You will learn the basics of story structure, how it relates to premise development, and how to “map” your story’s structure to the “Anatomy of a Premise Line” template to create your first-pass premise line.

Written Assignment:

AFTER you have read the assigned reading, using the “Premise Line Worksheet,” map your premise line to the Invisible Structure of your story idea. Upload this to the system for review by midnight PST, Thursday Jan 19.

Chat/ZOOM Session:

Monday Jan 16, 6pm PST, 7pm MST, 8pm CST, 9pm EST. Length 45–60 mins.
Friday Jan 20, 6pm PST, 7pm MST, 8pm CST, 9pm EST. Length 45–60 mins.

Week Three:

This week we look at what “high concept” really means and what publishers are talking about when they ask you to give them high-concept writing. We will also define what a log line is and why you need one. Topics: Steps 4 and 5 of the 7-step process, log line defined, the 7 component of any high-concept idea, and take another pass at your premise line to refine and tighten.

Written Assignment:

AFTER you have read the assigned reading, using the “7 Components of Any High-Concept Idea Worksheet” analyze your premise idea for its high concept elements. Upload this worksheet to the system for review by midnight PST, Thursday Jan 26.

Chat/ZOOM Session:

Monday Jan 23, 6pm PST, 7pm MST, 8pm CST, 9pm EST. Length 45–60 mins.
Friday Jan 27, 6pm PST, 7pm MST, 8pm CST, 9pm EST. Length 45–60 mins.
Week Four:

This week we’ll look at creating a “final” of your premise line and log lines, based on feedback from the one-on-one sessions, and learning gained during the premise testing process. “Final” is relative here, as you will be continuing to refine both your premise and log lines throughout the course. Topics: Steps 6 and 7 of the 7-step process, finalize premise line, finalize log line, and fill out the “Premise Testing Checklist.

Written Assignment:

Using the “Premise Line Worksheet”, write out the next version of your premise line and its clauses. Using the “Log Line Worksheet,” write out the next version of your log line. Also fill out, per the lecture and assigned reading, the “Premise Testing Checklist.” Upload all of these to the system for review by midnight PST, Thursday Feb 2.

Chat/ZOOM Session:

Monday Jan 30, 6pm PST, 7pm MST, 8pm CST, 9pm EST.  Length 45–60 mins.
Friday Feb 3: 6pm PST, 7pm MST, 8pm CST, 9pm EST.  Length 45–60 mins.

Week Five:

This week’s lecture and reading will introduce the synopsis-writing process and describe the parameters for developing a two- to three-page synopsis for the story idea developed to this point in the class. You will also learn the second structure needed to tell any story: the Visible Structure. Some stories will be farther along than others, but everyone will be introduced to the basic approach to synopsis development. While you won’t have to write a synopsis, you will be asked to plan the middle of your story and set the stage for your first synopsis. This final week will also cover “next steps” in the development process, giving you some direction on how to proceed with development after class is over, so that you don’t lose momentum. So, this last week will be challenging.
Written Assignments:

AFTER you have done the reading for the week on synopsis writing and the Visible Structure, and studied the worksheet and synopsis examples provided—using the “Short Synopsis Worksheet,” write out a first-pass version of your worksheet data—upload this worksheet to the system for review by midnight PST, Thursday Feb 9.

OPTIONAL Written Assignment #2:

Using the “Short Synopsis Template,” and using your worksheet data as your guide, take a crack at writing a short synopsis. If you don’t have time, that is okay. The main thing is to try either during this week or in the following days of class. This is for you and for practice, as we probably won’t have time to review sample synopses during the last week. It is more important that you get the worksheet done.

Chat/ZOOM Session:

Monday Feb 6, 6pm PST, 7pm MST, 8pm CST, 9pm EST. Length 45–60 mins.
Friday Feb 10, 6pm PST, 7pm MST, 8pm CST, 9pm EST. Length 45–60 mins.